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New suburbia, now: The possibilities of modular construction

Mark Latham interviewed by Dhruv Sookhoo

Mark Latham, Regeneration Director at Urban Splash, questions the future of suburbia and discusses how modular construction can offer greater adaptability.

Mark Latham is an advocate of modern methods of construction in residential design and development. He reflects upon how contemporary approaches to modular housing can reshape residents' experiences of suburban settings.

Dhruv Sookhoo (DS): 'Suburbia' conjures up different things to different people. What does the word mean to you?

Mark Latham (ML): My own experience of suburbia was the surreal, closeted versions you find in British military bases around the world from Warminster to Germany to Cyprus. The house types and cul-de-sacs are straight out of volume builder playbooks. You're inside a barbed wire fence and outside there might be palm trees or lederhosen! Like all army families, we moved on every two to three years, never putting down the roots, that are – it seems to me – one of the great strengths of suburbia.

At its best, suburbia for me conjures up peaceful leafy streets, neighbourliness, spaciousness and stability, connections with nature and green space, a sense of comfort, security, and community. The classic flipside to this is the potential for a banal uniformity that reflects a settled, self-satisfied understanding of normative behaviours. There is potential for suburbia to produce a suffocating sameness and for that characterless repetition of built form to reflect the assumption that every life lived within the suburban homes is identical. This leaves a nagging feeling of disconnectedness and isolation, which goes with that lack of diversity and sense of underwhelming mediocrity. In this kind of suburbia there may be a feeling that real life is going on somewhere else in the exciting, wider world.

DS: Urban Splash is celebrated for its distinctive approach to residential development. What do you predict will be the major changes in the way we conceive of, and experience, suburbia by 2050?

ML: I won't be the only one thinking that a massive driver will surely be

climate change, coupled with advances in technology. Both offer constraints and opportunities. For suburbia, I see particular impacts in terms of changing habits around transport, and different opportunities for physical and digital connectedness. The pressure to reduce private car ownership and the possibilities of autonomous, on-demand, subscription-based personal transport services will trigger a number of shifts: public transport networks could be newly invigorated, and more people will cycle or walk. Just think of all that space currently set aside for storing cars – in garages, on plot, on street, in car parks – that could be freed up for alternative uses.

Technology will continue to erode that suburban sense of disconnectedness and distance from the heart of things. Now, the world is within your grasp from your phone, you can work from home, you can browse the virtual shelves of any shop from your armchair. Some interactions – live music, meeting up with mates at the pub, kissing your lover – will remain resolutely face-to-face. But the balance between the tranquillity and separation of the suburb on the one hand and the activity, congestion, and exchange of urban centres will be ever more blurred.

Another looming challenge is demographic change, and the need to develop living formats and communities adaptable to multigenerational occupation. How do we enable older people living ever longer and healthier lives to continue to live in suburban locations – where they have roots, social capital and networks, and form vital civil societal functions – while freeing them from sitting on large house assets better suited to families.

Across a number of projects at Urban Splash, we are actively thinking about futureproofing to address these and other emerging issues. We can't hope to get it all right, but suburbia has proved a resilient and adaptable format over the years.

DS: Speculative developers have used pattern books or house types for centuries, with mixed results for suburban placemaking. As relatively new entrants to the housing market how do you manage the tension between delivering a standardised, modular product and your desire to create unique places?

ML: You've hit the nail on the head – that is precisely the central challenge we face as we look to disrupt housebuilding norms and scale up our modular business: how to balance repetition and variety, efficient standardisation and individual customisation, repeatable typologies and local contextual responses. After all, we want to beat the volume builders, not join them.

One answer is that the inherent flexibility of our modular typologies is specifically intended to allow multiple purchasers to occupy the same basic footprint in many different ways *[1, 2]*.

This facilitates greater social diversity, not necessarily normative household types, and the layouts can be readily changed over time, building in long-term adaptability.

We are now working with shedkm on ways to apply a wide variety of façade treatments, materiality, and colour on to our standard volumetric chassis using common fixing systems. This allows us to respond more sensitively to local character and conditions, and to vary elevational appearances even within a single terrace or street of houses, without overly compromising efficiency and standardisation, or resorting to pastiche. We are very active in this area of research and development at the moment, and this modular approach will be key to unlocking many more sites and consents.

We are also developing a family of formats of different sizes to sit alongside Town House; offering further variety and a clear focus on their ability to be mixed and matched in many different layout configurations – terraced, crescent, semi-detached, and freestanding. Over time, I believe we will need to explore formats for other uses to be incorporated – corner shops, a pub, homeworking, older care.

Finally, we will always play close attention to the wider setting, such as the role of public space, streets, gardens, unique historical and landscape features that frame the houses themselves. We have always been committed to highly bespoke and place-specific responses in our developments. That won't change, even though the house types may be essentially repeated.

DS: Other modular products attempt to replicate the neo-vernacular aesthetic associated with volume housebuilders. You commission developments that don't. Does this limit your market to more pioneering residents?

ML: Maybe, but that's still not a small market. Yes, there will be buyers who prefer the safety of traditional looking homes, but in our view, people very often buy a home from the volume housebuilders simply because that's the only thing on offer.

We are proud and vocal champions of contemporary design. We want our homes to look like they've been built in the twenty-first century, because they have. Our homes may not be to everyone's taste, but we don't need or want to appeal to *absolutely everyone*. We certainly think there are plenty of people out there dissatisfied with what the volume builders offer and who are looking for other choices. The popularity of *Grand Designs*, the burgeoning interest in conversions, self-build and custom-build, all indicates an ever more design-aware and quality-hungry public, and unmet market demand.

On the supply side, many developers err towards conservative styling, because of perceived planning risk. It's

often far easier to get consent for stuff that looks like a standard volume housing builder product, than to stick your neck out and create homes that have a strong contemporary look. Neo-vernacular will get waved through on the nod nine times out of ten – it's hard for an authority to refuse what has already been consented hundreds of times before. Whereas anything unfamiliar, bold, or new will be scrutinised and grilled to the nth degree, even when it's demonstrably of higher quality!

DS: Traditional suburban housing is often associated with low-density housing within and the predominance of private gardens over shared amenity and public realm. How have Urban Splash challenged these stereotypes to provide more cohesive neighbourhoods?

ML: We are very interested in this dynamic and the potential to combine the best suburban qualities of plentiful private open green space and tranquillity, while maintaining relatively high densities of dwellings per hectare and a sense of community and place. In standard *volumeville* suburbia, built frontages and public realm are highly fragmented, street patterns and routes meandering and nonintuitive, cul-de-sacs lead you to dead ends, land use is often wasteful.

Our modular Town House is essentially an urban terraced, rather than suburban typology, lending itself to more conventional legible linear streets and blocks and higher densities than normal suburbia. Not only is this more responsible use of land, but moves towards densities capable of sustaining more local amenities, more frequent public transport services and reducing car-dependent travel habits.

In terms of gardens, the volume builder offering is usually little larger than a postage stamp, *a token scrap of land* to call your own, penned in by a tall garden fence. At our Port Loop scheme in Birmingham, our upcoming projects in Milton Keynes and Northstowe outside Cambridge, we are offering generous private patios demised to each house at the back giving out onto larger shared communal gardens at the heart of each perimeter block *[3]*. This not only offers the opportunity for meaningful areas of open green, space with the possibility of larger mature trees and space to breathe, but also promotes neighbourly interaction and a sense of community. It's interesting to see other recent projects, such as Marmalade Lane in Cambridge taking a similar approach.

DS: Modular housing has potential to offer residents varying, welcome degrees of choice through customisation. But how do you manage the tension between managing variation and delivering efficiency and buildability?

ML: We see customer choice as a really important component of changing housebuilding norms. The modular construction methodology came from that, not the other way round. We

think it's important to give customers choice to inhabit their homes in a way that suits their lifestyle, household makeup, and what's most important to them – and potentially to change that over time as well – because one size really doesn't fit all. The industry is fixated on the number of bedrooms a house has. Whereas, we all know it's not just about bedroom numbers, but size, layout, and *how you live* in them that counts. A big open plan format may suit couples with no children or older downsizers, but not a busy family of five. Having your living space on the top floor could work brilliantly in a location looking out over a fantastic view or a congested urban location, whereas plenty will prefer daily contact with the garden on the ground floor. The point that as far as possible is we don't decide what matters, the customer does.

You're right that there is a tension between variation and efficiency. But car makers like Jaguar-Land Rover have managed to crack this, providing high levels of customisation through honed and super-efficient manufacturing processes. In other countries, like Japan, these principles have been successfully applied to housebuilding too. So it is possible. We have worked hard together with architects shedkm and our in-house design team at Urban Splash Modular to achieve a format which is highly rational and simple in its framework, but adaptable to variety with minimal changes to the base. When we first developed the Town House concept with shedkm, it quickly became clear that the format was capable of providing hundreds of different permutations through different wall positions and room arrangements within the same base 'box'. We deliberately whittled this down to a more manageable *seventy-two options.* Not only to avoid cost and factory production complexities, but also to avoid blinding the customer with choice overload. Making this approach work requires adaptations needed to sales processes, careful management of order lead times in the factory and so on which we continue to refine and improve. We are operating outside many of the received norms of the industry and constantly learning as we go. But we like that, we've always enjoyed writing new rules, stepping where others fear to tread and refusing to believe that 'it will never work'.

DS: Proportionately, very few architects participate in the design and delivery of mass housing, rather than one-off homes. This is often identified as being a barrier to achieving improved residential design. What impact do you think this absence of architects and other designers has on how we experience suburbia?

ML: Looking at some of the best recent housing: Accordia, Great Kneighton by Proctor and Matthews Architects and Eddington in Cambridge, New Hall in Harlow, and Mikhail Riches's newly completed Goldsmith Street in Norwich. While the quality of the *individual homes* is notable, so too is the sense of a *distinct place*, which you can warm to

and identify with. A place you would be *proud to call home*. There is clear contemporary architectural language, but also connections to recognisable local materials, proportions, building forms, layouts, and landscape, which gives these projects a sense of simultaneously being *familiar* and *new*. That's not an easy trick to pull off.

Designing and detailing beautiful individual house types is not sufficient, you have to be able to assemble and marshal them into successful collections of homes, which work coherently with each other and the surrounding landscape to form satisfying streets, and squares, and neighbourhoods *[4–6]*. And let's be clear, not all architects – even *really good* ones – have those masterplanning abilities. The role of landscape and urban designers to shape the wider setting is also crucial. What is certain, however, is that without good designers you get 'anywhere-ville'. The *endless, featureless suburbia* that Gordon Cullen wrote about in the 1970s.

DS: Any final thoughts?

ML: Yes, the role of architects and other designers is obviously central, but you also need skilled and committed clients with a vision and values beyond simply making the most money possible out of any given piece of land. There are a handful of us out there, and thankfully we are growing in number. It's high time we all had a go at *a new kind of suburbia*.

For more information about A New Kind of Suburbia see: https://metwork.co.uk/

Illustration credits
arq gratefully acknowledges: Metropolitan Workshop and Urban Splash, 4–6; shedkm and Urban Splash, 2; Urban Splash, 1, 3.

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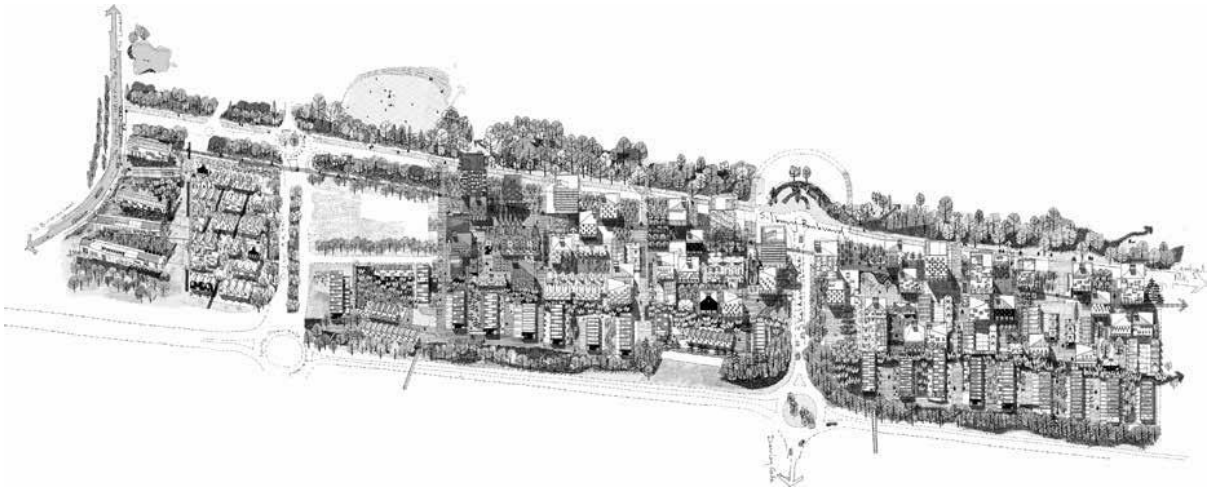
Figures

1 Volumetric floor modules of Town Houses being craned into position to form terrace rows at New Islington, Manchester.

2 Interior of Town House designed by shedkm for Urban Splash.

3 Illustrative aerial view of Port Loop, Birmingham to be delivered by Places for People and Urban Splash in association with Birmingham City Council and the Canal and River Trust. Designed by shedkm, Maccreanor Lavington, Glenn Howells Architects, and Grant Associates.



4–6 Campbell Park North Competition Masterplan, Milton Keynes to be delivered through joint venture with Urban Splash and Places for People. Designed by Metropolitan Workshop, shedkm and Glenn Howells Architects.

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